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ABSTRACT

Many universities rely on multiple choice or true/false tests to admit students to mass communication programs. The high stakes that prospective majors face suggest that there is an urgent need for departments to rethink their assumptions about entrance testing, as a narrow conception of scholastic ability can undermine any attempt to "weed out" the under-prepared student. Recent research suggests that rhetorical "modeling" may be the best method for teaching writing. Although modeling is a highly accepted and effective method for teaching news writing, most departments that employ modeling in the upper division reporting classes rely on rote learning to enroll journalism majors. The test attempts to measure writing proficiency by assessing the ability to identify and correct grammatical errors. An alternative testing system is needed to better judge student strengths in more than one area of learning. One idea is to administer two tests: an objective skills test, and an essay test. Or departments could use the CUNY Writing Skills Assessment Test, which tests an understanding of essay organization, and the TEEP (Testing in English for Educational Purposes) test developed by Cyril Weir, which reflects a "communicative paradigm" for testing reading comprehension, writing, and speaking. (PRA)

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# Rhetorical and Grammatical Tests to Enter Students as Mass Communication Majors

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A number of universities rely heavily on entrance tests to admit students to mass communication programs. Department policy frequently states that students aspiring to declare a communication major must first score a certain percentage on a multiple choice or true and false test. In some cases, student who fail the objective test are allowed to retake it in essay form. Many times, however, entrance tests are not explicitly intended to predict success in communication classes, but, rather, they are designed to "weed out" under prepared students in a crowded, popular program.

Any entrance test implicitly tests "success" or competence, however, whether the fact is explicitly recognized or not. An entrance test may be unfair, if for no other reason than it could unwittingly and arbitrarily bar some students from studying in their chosen field. There is some vagueness, therefore, about what success means, beyond admittance to the program, in terms of the concepts operationalized on some entrance tests.

An alternative to appealing to the college dean for permission to simply raise the threshold grade point average for entering students, as has been done by some communication departments, is to find out more precisely what an entrance test measures, and whether the test matches

up with what the curriculum demands of its majors.

Standard sophomore-level communication writing skills courses seem to embody the tacit, apparently conflicting expectations of many communication departments. These survey courses are often required for all admitted majors. Such courses vary greatly in content, but they are usually composed of two basic elements. On one hand, the students are graded on objective tests and quizzes. This component tests rote learning skills associated with lecture note taking, reading, synthesis, and memorization. Theoretically, learning grammar belongs in this component. On the other hand, a large portion of the student's final grade hinges on his or her ability to handle deadline pressure and to compose essays, news stories, persuasive pieces, and scripts for broadcast and print.

Some outmoded values may enter in when evaluating the skills component, especially in the instances where a former news worker or a graduate student is doing the teaching. It is common for instructors to express the desire, as newspaper editors have often done, that communication graduates be able to "write." That is, the student should be able to compose a tight lead and know how to use a comma. However, not much attention is given by instructors to the

rhetorical aspects of writing, even though it can be argued that all prose, including news writing, is highly rhetorical in nature. One reason this may not be widely recognized is instructors are steeped in the "objective" vocabulary of journalism and the social sciences, and less so in the principles and theories of rhetoric. For instance, journalism educators tend to hold on to the anachronistic belief that prose can be a mirror on reality and, thus, few of them can express what they expect of novice news writers, in terms of an ability to compose a reality tale that is compelling in terms of audience impact. Yet, tragic, comic, and otherwise rhetorical pieces are the kinds of well-read stories that editors want, and which get into newspapers every day of the year.

Recent research suggests that a rhetorical "modeling" approach may be best, when it comes to teaching novices how to communicate effectively on paper. For one thing, some research suggests grammar errors may actually go up when beginning writers advance from one skill plateau to another. Modeling, a time honored rhetorical tradition, is now widely accepted as an effective means to teach news writing. Yet, why would the same department that employs modeling techniques in its upper division reporting classes rely on

rote learning to enroll its journalism majors? This is precisely what a pencil and paper entrance test seems to be measuring.

Students need to know how to make their writing conform to mechanical conventions so that the reader will understand their meaning. However, exploring, drafting, and revising a piece of writing is more basic than grammatical correctness, and the rhetorical aspect should be treated as such, whether it applies to assigning a grade in class or to admitting someone as a major to the department.

Potentially the biggest problem with pen and pencil tests is that test-takers are expected to be able to identify dangling modifiers and plural pronouns that refer to collective nouns. Yet, going into the test, they are not expected to be able to identify the eight parts of speech! Writing skills instructors often complain that students who pass the entrance test typically have a substandard grasp of writing for college sophomores. The typical complaint is that today's students don't know their adverbs from a homonym and "can't write." Yet this unscientific correlation between knowledge of grammar and writing talent does not begin to explain the "failure" on the part of the students to produce a clear sentence or a readable piece of prose.

More likely, it is a reflection of a mixed message being sent to the students and a byproduct of the test administrator's own socialization into the communication business, rather than any quantifiable deficiency in the student's talent or promise as a writer. Steps should be taken to discourage students from guessing on an entrance test.

The first step toward addressing these concerns is to get a better idea about what a test is actually testing. In a pilot study, preliminary findings showed that slightly more than a third of the variance was explained by a correlation between entrance test scores taken from student files and objective test scores on exams and quizzes in a mass communication writing skills course. There was no correlation found between the students' entrance test score and their averaged grades on writing assignments in the course. Given the liberties taken with statistical hypothesis testing, there need be no rush to alter an existing entrance test based on the study's findings. They do offer some food for thought, however, about whether there may be two distinct learning components in communication coursework.

An alternative entrance test could conceivably be

adopted, to better test student strengths in more than one area of learning. Some general recommendations for a new testing procedure might include administering two tests: a "gpa" test for objective skills measurement, and an essay test for writing competence. This would work better than trying to discover a student's writing proficiency by assessing his or her ability to identify and correct grammatical errors, as a large body of English language acquisition research in the late 1970s and early 1980s counter indicates.

Two recommended essay tests could provide a better result for judging writing skill than an objective test. The CUNY 6-point writing assessment, which was developed in 1983, tests a basic understanding of the demands of essay organization. The Writing Skills Assessment Test is available through the CUNY Task Force on Writing, at the City University of New York, Office of Academic Affairs. Another test developed by Cyril Weir reflects what the author calls a "communicative paradigm" for testing reading comprehension, listening comprehension, writing and speaking.

Journalism educators will be reassured to know that Weir's essay test looks much like a beginning reporting

textbook exercise with some additional marking controls. The test battery is called TEEP for testing in English for educational purposes. Chapter four in Weir's book titled Communicative Language Testing, which was published in 1990, discusses the pros and cons of testing through this broadly conceptualized paradigm. In my opinion, the broader the operationalized definition of language competence the better.

The high stakes that prospective communication majors face suggests a reliable test like the CUNY test or the TEEC test is worth considering. At the very least, there is an urgency for departments to periodically rethink their assumptions about entrance testing. A narrow conception of scholastic ability can undermine any attempt at "weeding out" the under prepared student.

Finally, essay tests offer some new possibilities for "blending" speech communication and mass communication. A mass communication department's interest in rhetorical principles and theories can not only yield a better testing method. When properly applied in the classroom, they can also enhance the performance of students already enrolled in mass communication curriculum. Further research should be done to refine these claims.